

TRADITIONAL SALT MAKING AMONG THE MEITEIS OF MANIPUR: A STUDY ON INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

Salt as an important ingredient of food is obtained from different sources of nature like sea water, salt-springs, domes or rock bed etc. It is indispensably required both by humans and animals. Salt not only relishes our meal but also serves as an item for preserving food and seasoning. This mineral substance has been playing a very vital role in the socio-religious and economic spheres of human cultures round the globe. The present paper is an outcome of the field investigation conducted at Ningel village in the Thoubal district of Manipur. Ningel is the only surviving village in Manipur, where traditional method of salt making is still in practice. Participant observation and interview methods were adopted during the field investigation. Findings from the local publications and other secondary sources like books of history, institutional reports, monograph etc. are also incorporated here to analyse both the textual and contextual data in the historical development salt making in Manipur. The present study not only have stressed upon the traditional knowledge system of the community but an attempt has also been made to explore some of the intangible aspects and their relevance to the socio-economic and religious sphere of both the hills men and plainsmen in Manipur. The religious beliefs and practices, concerning with the use of salt among them are also tried to incorporate in this paper to know the importance of these practices in maintaining strong and peaceful social relations. To salvage this age old tradition, steps were also taken by the Government organization like Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya to develop paraphernalia of salt making site, as an exhibit in its open air exhibition premises. A demonstrative workshop was organized by inviting some skilled members of the village in the museum campus. The paper also examines the parameters of those problems faced out of change of context,, when these traditional salt makers were displaced from their own working environment to a new environment (museum campus) for making salt.

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Introduction

Manipur with a landmass of 22,327 Sq.Km, covered with 90 percent of hill area is centered by a flat-oval shaped valley. It is ideally situated in the eastern corner of the Indian sub-continent and bordered with the neighboring country Myanmar in the east. The State is bounded on the north by Nagaland, Assam on the West and Mizoram on the south. The land is inhabited by three major ethnic groups; the Meitei, Nagas and the Kuki-chin. The valley of Manipur is predominantly inhabited by the Meiteis who speaks Meitei dialect which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. Meities are the larger ethnic fold comprising of seven major clan-groups that ruled under their respective chiefdoms and principalities. During the historical period, there were seven clans of the Meiteis but there were five principalities ruled by five clan chieftains who were also both political and social heads of the respective clans (Kabui 1991:146). Meitei as a nationality came into existence by the amalgamation of these seven clans or *Salais* under which many other social ethnic groups were also merged. Successive growth of immigrants in this kingdom was reported from the reign of king *Kyamba* (1467-1508 A.D) onwards among which some of them were the war captives. They were given permanent settlement and further absorbed into different clan groups into the larger social fold *the Meiteis*.

The land has witnessed a good number of immigrants from different geographical areas. Some sections of the western immigrants are reported to be well acquainted with the work of making salt. Historical account on the immigration and settlement of the *Mayang Kalishas*¹ (a sect of western immigrants) gives some link on the early period of salt making in Manipur. The *Mayang Kalichas* entered into the territory of Manipur from the west by crossing the *Jiri*, *Barak* and *Iril river* and made their first settlement on the bank of *Leimatak* river. According to Bhogeshwar,”the Meiteis called them as *Pangal Maar* (Sharma 1991:61). Their villages were often raided by the *Khumal* king *Adon Thinkolhanba* during 930 A.D. to collect salt from them. Their forefathers belonged to the fishermen community, who used to supplement their economy by manufacturing salt at the sea shore and the tradition of salt making continued to exist when they entered the territory of Manipur” (Sharma 1991:63). According to Chandrasingh (1976), “these people first came into contact by the *Khuman* king *Adon Thinkolhanba* in the year 930 A.D. who raided their villages and brought some of them as war captives and they were given land to settle in the area presently known as *Meeyang yumpham* (Sharma 1991:62). The settlements of the *Mayang Kalishas* were not confined to a particular place but extended to certain areas of Manipur where they were entrusted to work for the manufacture of salt. They were further shifted to settle at *Yawakhong* (presently Waikhong), and engaged for the manufacture of salt. This place of their settlement is still existed under the name of *Waikhong Laimanai* (Sharma 1991:62). *Waikhong* is considered to be one of the prime locations where salts were manufactured mainly for the royal family. The production of salt under the patron of the king in the *Meiteileipak* (the land of Meiteis) began during the reign of king Paikhomba (1666-97). After the discovery of naturally existed salt sites in the eastern foot-hills and valley of Manipur like *Chikhong* and *Ningel*, the *Meeyang Kalishas* from the *Waikhong* were engaged for the production of salt in these areas too. During the reign of Maharaja Bhagyachandra, when the salt site *Chandrakhong* was discovered, they were further allowed to make their settlement at *Chandrakhong*, for the production of salt (Sharma 1991:63).

According to Pemberton Report, 1835. “The valley, however, is particularly rich in the far more valuable mineral of salt, the principal springs of which are found on its eastern side, not far from the foot of the hills. The best are those of *Wueekhong*, *Ningyal*, *Sengmiee* and *Chundrukhong*, where salt is manufactured in quantities not only sufficient for the

consumption of the inhabitants of the valley, but to be made an article of traffic with the surrounding tribes, who barter for it their tobacco, ginger, cloths and cotton. The salt obtained from springs of *Wueekhong*, is far superior to that of the other localities named, and supply for the use of the Royal family is always obtained from thence. The spots containing these springs are said to be discovered by a very subtle vapour, which is always found hovering over them at an early hour of the morning; as soon as the fact is clearly ascertained, a shaft is sunk down to the spring, and cylinders, formed of the hollowed trunks of a large trees, let perpendicularly into the opening, are preserved in an erect position, by ramming earth between them and the sides of the well; the diameter of the cylinders is seldom more than six feet, and the depth varies from forty to sixty feet. All the wells are considered the property of the Rajah, who levies a tax of $1/5^{\text{th}}$ upon the quantity of water drawn; from the remainder the wages of the manufactures are defrayed, each of whom receives per mensem to baskets of salt containing on hundred circular pieces each, amounting in weight to $12\frac{1}{2}$ seers, the bazaar price of which varies from three to four rupees. The villagers engaged in this manufacture cultivate but to a very limited extent, and barter their salt for the products of the agriculturist and fisherman. The quantity of salt, obtained by artificial evaporation, is about $1/19^{\text{th}}$ of the weight of water, and were it subjected to any subsequent purification, this proportion would probably be reduced to $1/20^{\text{th}}$, which is nearly double the quantity obtained at Newcastle, by solar evaporation, from sea water, where from 30 to 40 tons of water produced but one of salt, and is on the other hand, considerably less than the saturated solution of rock-salt and sea-water, from which salt is obtained in the proportion of 23 percent “ (Sanajaoba1993:29-30).

Historically, the Loi communities were assigned to work for the manufacture of salt by the Kings of Manipur. According to McCulloch, “the Loe population is exceedingly useful. Amongst them are the silk manufactures, the smelters of iron, the distillers of spirits, the makers of earthen vessels for containing water or for cooking in, the cutters of pots and beams and canoes, manufacturers of salt, fishers, cutters of grass for the Raja’s ponies, the payers of tribute in *Sel*, the coin of the country etc”. (Hudson 1997:30). The Loi, from the historical perspective, were a group of people who paid tribute to the king or who were ostracized to Loi villages for violation of cultural conventions and consequently degraded to be the Lois. The contextual specific connotation of the term *Loi* is found to be different from its historical specific connotation. In its present context and meaning it embraces only the Lois who has been enlisted in the Scheduled Castes. Thus, the term, in its current sense, does not cover the many of the Lois who were regarded as Lois in the historical past (Nabakumar 2004). These contextual changes are clearly visible among the villagers of the present study area where traditional salt is manufactured.

Ningel village

Ningel is a small village situated at a distance of about 31 Kms to the East from the Imphal city. From the capital Imphal, it is well connected by a pucca road upto Yairipok which is its nearest town and it comes under the administrative control of Thoubal district of Manipur. The village society is homogenous, solely inhabited by 60 households of the Meitei community. Ningel is one of the important villages, known to have existed since the beginning of salt production in Manipur.

Dr. Brown recorded that, “Nearly the whole of the salt consumed by the Mannipories is obtained from salt wells situated in the valley. A small quantity is occasionally imported in times of scarcity from Burmah. The principle salt wells are situated at the foot of the hills to the north-east, about fourteen miles from the capital; they are four in numbers and are named *Ningail*, *Chundrakhong*, *Seekhong* (*Chi*= salt, *Khong*= well), and *Waikong*; they all lie close together and are surrounded by villages wherein reside those engaged in the salt

manufacture. Wells have been opened in other parts of the valley but the supply has not been remunerative” (Hudson 1997:31)

All the above villages are located near one another and the salt wells still exist. However, preparation of traditional salt is now only practiced in the Ningel village. Ningel is reported to be the only surviving village where the production of local salt-cake is still in practice to meet the domestic, religious and ceremonial needs of the people of Manipur. According to Dr. Brown, “Ningail is the oldest of all the wells, and has always given the greatest yield. The amount of salt manufactured varies according to the season, the most being made in the cold weather, when the water is at its strongest. About 150 maunds a month was the average last year (1867-68), of which more than half was furnished by Ningail alone. Dr. Brown also recorded that, “the effect of the earthquake of January, 1869, has been to increase the yield of salt water in the well enormously; the water in the Ningail well after the earthquake rose six feet, and this rise has continued up to the present time undiminished. The effect of earthquake has been observed before, but not to such an extent or remaining for so long time” (Hudson 1997:35).

The people of Ningel village have now shifted their occupation on agricultural work as their primary occupation. Only eight families are found manufacturing salt as their secondary occupation.

The village has three salt-wells; two of which are cemented and the remaining oldest one is a wooden structure. The villagers mainly used the oldest well as it carries larger volume of salt water that remained filled all the time. There is a Shrine of the guardian deity *Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi* in its northern extremity of the village which is very near to the site of salt well. Ningel river flows westward at the southern boundary of the village and it is the main water source of the village. The village has now reached the connection of water and electricity from the Government. Inter-village kuccha road linking one village to another are muddy but motorable.

Meitei Salt

The general term for common salt in the Meitei dialect is *Thum* and it is also called *Chi*. Locally produced traditional salt in the form of a cake is called *Meitei thumpak*. Cakes of salt have been used as money in Ethiopia and elsewhere in Africa, and in Tibet. In the Roman army an allowance of salt was made to officers and men; in imperial times, this *salarium* (from which the English word “salary” is derived) was converted into an allowance of money for salt (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1977:193). In Manipur, indigenous salt in the olden days was considered as an item of reward, given by the Maharaja to the brave persons for their heroic deeds. According to an ancient texts *Loiyam Shinyam* (The 12th Century Constitution) the rules of reward given by the Maharaja as a trophy for catching the tiger, mentions that,” when ten persons catch the tiger, only three of them will be selected for the trophy: (1) To the first one will be rewarded, one *Pari* of paddy field, *Thum namma* (equivalent to one hundred plates of common salt); (2) *Phimakhai phi* (cloth) (*Thum Nama*) will be given to the next; (3) The third one will be given a share in the *Thum Nama* and clothes (Sanajaoba 1993:10)

The word *thum* in itself is powerful to indicate the name of place, area, status of a person, economy etc. when it is prefixed or suffixed to other words. It has been divinely placed to reckon the name the presiding goddess of Salt well or site called *Thum Lairembi*. The Meitei term for ‘coin’ is referred to as *sel* whereas the meaning of economy is incomplete without the suffix of *thum* i.e. *Sel-thum*. Likewise the word ‘Valuables or wealth’ is also indicated with the suffix of *thum* i.e. *Lan-thum*. *Thumrungba* represents the person appointed by the Maharaja to look after the salt wells. The combination of *thum* (salt) and

Khong (well) indicates the place of salt well. Thus, the word *thum* had been a cultural element that projects the socio-religious and economic strength of the the people of Manipur.

Thum Khong (Salt reservoir)

Salt waters in the Ningel foothill are reserved and stored in the well constructed by piercing a giant hollow wood of length about *Lam mapanga makhai shangba* i.e. 54½ ft. in length. It is said that the wooden well was installed during the reign of Maharaj Chingthangkomba, popularly known by Rajshree Bhagyachandra in the 18th century A.D. The site is believed to have been guarded by the goddess *Thumkhong Lairembi* who is venerated and given reverence by the villagers and the common people while visiting the site.

Thum-Shung-Shang (Salt Preparing Shed)

The shed where salt is manufactured is known as *Thum shung sang*. It is a structure having three walls, raised out of bamboo mats or splits duly supported with bamboo or wooden poles. The roof of the shed is two sided and thatched with local grasses. The shed looks simple but is very effective in receiving maximum amount of wind.

Thum Leirang (Salt preparing Hearth/Kiln)

Salt is prepared in a typical form of longitudinal hearth called *thum leirang*. It is a raised structure made out of clay having two openings, one in the front end and other in the rear end. The front opening or the mouth is called *Chamang*. It measures about 1½ ft. in width and 1ft. in height. Fire wood is placed and set fire from this opening. The hearth comprises of circular holes of two different sizes called *Kamit*. These holes serves as oven upon which pan and trays are mounted. The larger holes in front of the hearth are mainly used for boiling the salt water whereas the succeeding smaller holes are used for giving the shape of the salt. The length of hearth varies from one to another depending upon the ability of the manufacturer that, how much quantity of salt makers he can afford. Normally, the breath & height of each hearth seems almost the same which is scales about 1½ and 1 ft. The mouth of the hearth normally faces to such a direction, where it can receive maximum flow of wind for proper burning of fire. There are open spaces in two sides of the central hearth known as *Phambal* (space for the salt makers). *Kharung* (Earthen vessels for storing fresh salt water) *La* (plaintain leaves) and other tools are kept in this open space.

The rear opening of the hearth is called *Chaning*. The ashes of the burnt fuels are collected from this end which are stuffed and stored in a basket called *Khari Polang*. It is kept on a raised platform at the extreme corner of the two walls. It is used for obtaining *Khari ichum* (liquid ashes) to prepare *Khari* (edible soda). Another wooden and bamboo platform built behind the hearth to a close proximity of the rear wall is called *Lap yai* which is mainly for stacking fire wood to be used as a fuel for making salt.

Salt making tools

1. *Ishaiphu*: It is a vessel used at the time of collecting fresh salt water from the well.
2. *Thum Kagok*: It is a form of iron pan, locally prepared from the sheet of coal drums. In the olden day earthen pan were reported to have used as thum Kagok.
3. *Tei*: It is flat and circular tray, made of iron used for shaping the salt in the form of a cake.
4. *Koret*: A large sized spoon made of dry gourd used for pouring and stirring salt water.
5. *Meiphei*: A wooden device used for maintaining the temperature of heat that is surcharged by the burning of firewood inside the hearth. This spade like tool, hafted with a long wooden shaft is held by a lady, who regulates the temperature by inserting it inside the hearth and drawing the hot charcoals in desired holes of the hearth as demanded by the salt makers.

6. *Chilel*: An important tool made of brass plate hafted with a wooden handle is used mainly giving shape of salt in the form of a cake. Chilel is reported to have manufactured a single family of metal worker in the Yairipok town. The metal worker namely Sanahongba in Yairipok was entrusted for making of Chilel. After the death of Sanahongba, his son continued the art and tradition of making Chilel for the salt makers of Manipur.
7. *Chilenkhum*: It is an earthen vessel where plain waters are stored. It is used by the salt makers who dip and cool their chilels when it gets heated by continuous use for shaping of the salt.
8. *Kambi*: It is an earthen plate used for collecting precipitate salt obtained after evaporation.
9. *Chegai*: It is potsherd or a piece of pot used for scrapping the rim of salt cake to give a finishing touch.
10. *Shapa*: When precipitate salts are transformed into the form of salt-cakes, it is marked with a wooden stamp on the surface of the salt. This wooden stamp is called shapa and the process of marking is called shapa namba. The shape of these wooden markers varies from one shed to another and it is marked to identify the place of manufacture.

Method of Preparation

Commercial salt is manufactured from rock salt, and from seawater and other natural and artificial brines. Most of the artificial brines are obtained by pumping water into underground salt beds. A considerable amount of brine itself is used directly in industrial countries (Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol.16, 1977:194).

Artificial evaporation method is used by boiling the salt water in an open oven. Womenfolk are generally found to have engaged in whole process of making salt in the Ningel village. However, no such social taboos are existed where males are prohibited to participate in the making of salt. It is said that male folk in most of the time are engaged mainly in the collection of firewood and *Lanou* (plaintain leaves). Making of salt in a shed requires atleast six members such as

1. Eeshing Kabi (one who fetch salt water from the well)
2. Mei thabi (one who control over the firing of hearth)
3. Thum shabi (those who make salt)

Fresh salt waters collected from the well are brought to the shed and stored in a large earthen pitcher. This process is called *Eeshing Kaba*. Fetching of salt waters from the well is generally done by the female members but it is taboo among those women and girls who are in the state of menstruation. The site of salt-spring where well is constructed is regarded highly sacred by the villagers. It is believed to be the abode of a goddess called *Thumkhong lairembi* or the goddess of salt.

The entire work for the firing of hearth, the maintenance of temperature is solely taken under the care of *Mei thabi* who control over the raise and fall of heat inside the hearth. Heat inside the oven is controlled by using a tool called *Meiphei*. The required quantities of fresh salt waters are uniformly poured over the pans that are placed on the larger holes in successive rows. It is allowed to boil till a preliminary concentration of the salt water is noticed. The concentrated waters are then transferred from one pan to another with the help of Koret (dry gourd spoon), where maximum heat is available. This process is called *Khang Yenthokpa*. The precipitate form of salt with larger concentration produces white bubbles arising inside the pan. It shows that the boiling of salt water in an appropriate temperature is attained. These crystalline form of concentrated salts are collected in an earthen plate called kambi and transferred to the salt makers who are sitting at Phambal for giving shape of the

salt cake. Salt is given shape on the circular iron trays called *Tei* that are place upon the smaller holes of the hearth. By placing plantain leaves on the surface of the tray salts are given shape in a low temperature. Chilens are used for shaping and transforming the salts in the form of a cake which are further stamped with a wooden mark for identification. To get a complete form of round structure it is finally given finishing touch by rubbing the edges with the help of *Chegai* or the potsherds.

Types and uses salt

The locally manufactured salt cakes found in Manipur are circular in form and almost looks like the shape of a plate. It is produced in five different sizes, depending upon the nature of its use.

1.Thumjao: It is the biggest size of salt cake ever produced in Manipur. No other sizes of salt-cake is available, bigger then this. It is a plate shaped structure with an undulated upper surface. An inner rim formed by circular pit at the centre is also larger in dimension. It has broad margin and the edge of the salt is smooth that gently tapers towards the bottom. The radius of the inner ring is also larger. It is used as an item of offering during ancestral worship. It is also used at the time of marriage ceremony.



2.Thum Talak: It is little smaller than the *Thumjao*. A depression made at the central surface of the Talak is also small. It is mainly used for the purpose of consumption.



3.Thum Samer: Samer is characterized by the presence of a small ring of depression at the central surface and a thin edge. The margin from the inner ring to the outer edge is broad in this kind of salt. It is used as items of offering largely on the religious occasions and rituals like *Yupan thaba*, *Shrada* ceremony, *Phiroi* (dead anniversary), *Shida thinba* etc.



4..Thum Koiga: It is a plain form of salt cake that bears no central depression or inner ring. The edge of the outer circumference is thick. It is mainly used for consumption by a common household. The fine qualities of Koiga are generally used in preparing food or curry for the lady after the delivery of child who undergoes pollution period.



5.Thum macha: it is the smallest form of salt cakes produced by the Meitei salt makers. Thum macha is identified in its size of smallness which is about 7 inch in the surface diameter. The salt cakes though small do possess a depth of central depression forming an inner circle on the surface. It is used in the auspicious occasions, feast and festivals like, *Shajibu Cheiraoba* (Meitei New Year), *Lamtai thangja* etc. and the rituals involving into the ancestral worship.



Myth of salt

The village has a story that alludes to an ancient event of how the site of salt-spring was discovered. Sri. S. Jatishor Singh, a native of the village narrates that, "...long back, there lived a widow in a Tangkhul village called *Lairam Khullen*². She had a young pig which was nourished under her good care. One day she found her beloved pig lying dead in the pig sty due to the attack of a swarm of dreadful bees called *Khoiren*. These bees were humming all around and trying to carry the flesh of the pig in pieces. She attempted to quell the bees with all her effort but the bees began to attack her. She defended with great endurance to rescue her swine but not succeeded. Finally she had to conceal herself and took the help of the neighbors. Even after a long attempt of the neighbors to recover the body of the dead pig, this ferocious swarm of *Khoirens* remains continued to attack and carry the flesh until it left to skeletons.

The lady pent up and wails over the loss of her swine. She finally, rushes to the house of the village chief where she has narrated all about the incident. Her request to the chief for help was agreed and three young warriors were immediately sent along with her. As soon as they reach the place, they saw the bees flying westward direction. In order to trace the new hives, the boys along with the lady followed the path of the *Khoirens*. They were carrying some victuals along with them to eat on the way. The whole day's toil to search the *Khoirens* remained unsuccessful and surprisingly they almost have crossed the *Laimaton* hill ranges and lost their way to the western foothill. It was growing dark and the boys decided to make feasible arrangement for night-halt in that foothill. Being found disgraceful to their day's toil, the boys again resolved to continue their expedition with undaunted courage. The boys asked the lady to stay there until they return and prepare meal for all of them. Ensuring that, they will be returning the place in a short while; they left in different directions in search of the *Khoirens*. The lady started preparing meal for them by fetching water from the small stream which was running nearby. It was to her surprise that the meal took a long time to get completely cooked.

After some time one of the boys returned very exhaustively and asked the lady to give him water to drink. The lady served him water in a fresh bamboo container. The taste of the water was very different and unusual. He shouted! Why you have served me such defiled water which one cannot even taste? What you have added to this? The lady was surprised to such shameful and funny question. In such an annoying situation, all the boys returned and assembled there with a dreary scene of their unsuccessful expedition. They felt very disappointed to notice the temperaments aroused between the two. There was no other option for the lady to prove her innocence. She tasted the water in front of all the boys but it was indeed very salty. With a thirst to know the truth; all the boys began to taste the water. Finally, the matter was seriously taken, and all of them rushed to the nearby stream. The taste of water murmuring into the small stream of the foothill was found salty and they felt sorry to their deeds. To identify the spot which are unfrequented by men, they decided to plant a sapling of *Tarung* and finally resolved to inform to the then Maharaja Bhagyachandra. The site was immediately visited by the Maharaja and his councils. Maharaja was very much pleased with the discovery of salt site in his kingdom. He ordered the people to dig a big canal to trace the exact location of the stream. Experts were called upon to seek the plausible advice for making a reservoir. It was suggested to install a reservoir by perching a giant hollow wooden log to the bottom of the soil. Maharaja deployed some persons to find and locate such kind of tree. A *Ching Yengsin* tree was traced that could be appropriately used for making a wooden reservoir. This tree was found growing near the confluence point of the *Thoubal* river and a rivulet running from the *Sagol lou*. The tree was allowed to fell on an auspicious day. On the occasion of the pulling ceremony, three elephants were engaged. It was with a veil of illusion that the elephants could no longer

withstand to move the log even a small distance. In order to know the impending danger, a grand ceremony was observed under the divinations conducted by the famous priest and priestesses. The divination could reveal the presence of a spirit as the presiding deity. Such a spiritual enactment that was observed under the control of a famous priestess drew the attention of the King. The divine message revealed by priestess under her spiritual observations suggested that, the log could easily be pulled out by a single elephant when *Pena* (a kind of folk string instrument) is played to the back of the elephant and necessary spiritual observations are made. The pulling of log was commemorated with a grand merry making ceremony. An infuriated elephant was brought for the ceremony and it was accompanied by famous *Pena*³ singer, priest and priestess. The *Pena* player (fiddle player) played his instrument to the back of the elephant and made incantations related to the propitiation of divine tree (Uron shakpa). With this grand ceremony and ritual observance the huge wooden log was lifted and pulled up to the Nigal area where it was hollowed and installed to the present site.

It was Maharaja Bhagyachandra (1850-86), who announced with a genuine gratification to the Ningel villagers to reserve a place of honour for the widow in the annual *Lai Haraoba* festival of the village. The tradition of *Lei langba* (offering of flowers) by collecting flowers from the Lairam Naga village in the annual merry making ceremony continued to have existed after the death of the lady, to mark the honour and pride of her presence in the village festival.

Religious importance

The habitual use of salt is intimately connected with the advance from nomadic to agricultural life, a step in civilization that influenced the rituals and cultus of almost all ancient nations. The gods were worshipped as the giver of the kindly fruits of the earth, and salt was usually included in offerings consisting wholly or partly of cereal elements. Such offerings were prevalent among the Greeks and Romans and among the number of Semitic peoples (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1997:192) *Meitei Thumpak* is also an important item of ritual among the Meiteis. The locally produced *Thumpak* (salt-cake) are not only meant for consumption but also an item of offering in various ceremonies and ancestral worship. Among the Ningel villagers, the salt produced by them is required to exchange with flowers from the neighbouring tribal communities during their annual *Lai haraoba* (merry making festival) of the village.

A Shrine of the guardian deity *Nongpok Ningthou and Panthoibi*, situated to the northern extremity of the village is collectively worshipped by the villagers every year marking with a grand merry making ceremony called *Lai Haraoba*. It generally falls in the month of April-May. *Lai Haraoba* is an age old religious festival of the Meiteis celebrated in annual appeasement of the ancestral god and goddesses in the entire valley of Manipur.

During *Ningel Lai Haraoba* it is obligatory for the villagers to perform a ceremony called *Lei langba* (offering of flowers from a tribal village). The activity of *lei langba* is regulated by a practice where, male members of the village in three, five or seven go in a ritual procession. They have to visit *Lairam Khullen* village for collecting flowers to be offered to the deity. The rules and customs in collecting the flowers with a ritual procession are strictly observed. It is believed that the flowers that will be brought from the *Lairam Khullen* village possess the divine spirit of the Naga lady.

The persons who are entrusted for ritual procession shall have to carry salt cakes in an appropriate quantity, which is known as *Thumpot ama*⁴. This is carried for distribution among the Naga villages to mark the ongoing ritual procession. On the way, out of these *thumpot*, some amount of salts *Thum naamma*⁵ will be distributed to the *Erong* village. Distribution of salt to the villagers is an indication for the commencement of the *Lei langba* ritual. The ultimate destination of their journey will be the house of the *Khullakpa* (village

chief), where the remaining cakes of salt has to be handed over. These salts will be distributed to every household and the chief will give formal announcement for the collection of flowers to be offered. With this announcement, the unmarried boys and girls of the village prepare themselves and engage in collecting flowers. A special basket will be prepared by the chief where the flowers will be filled and decorated. Finally, with a prayer of good fortune and blessings, the chief will bid farewell by offering the basketful flowers to the flower collectors. These flowers are offered during the merry making festival of the village deity at Ningel village. They have a strong belief that one should not cross the way when ritual procession goes on and especially at the time when they return journey from the *Lairam Khullen* village after collecting flowers, because the basket of flower carried by them is possessed by an ancestral soul of a tribal lady who will be taking part in the merry making festival. This ancestral soul has been regarded as the one who first identified the *thum iphut* (salt spring). In order to avoid the evil effect of the soul, the villagers strictly follow the rule and never try cross their way during the procession.

Salt cake is one of the important items of offering in various rituals and ceremonies. Salt is indispensably used in birth ritual of a new born baby. Sanajaoba Naorem (1991),“..on the sixth day, there is a ritual *Ipan Thaba* following the devine tradition of the birth of *Konchin Tukthaba*, son of *Salail* by *Leimalel*. On this day, the ritual of sanctification with *Tairel Pungfai* leaves by the *maiba* takes place. *Naheiol*, the sanctification hymn is given by the *maiba* (priest). The whole premise of the child’s parent is thus sanctified. This is called *Yum Sengba* ritual of the Meiteis. The cultic requirements are (a) a pot of water full to the brim (*Ishaifu*), (b) two round discs of salt, (c) a basketful of paddy, (d) a garland of flowers having the colour of the particular *salai* (clan), (e) a garland of dry fish, (f) coins, (g) a piece of gold and (h) fruit and betel nut offerings. With these cultic arrangements, the primal deities of fire, water, air, earth and the heaven and also the sun will be worshipped as the primal manifestations of the Supreme ultimate being. The whole offerings are usually made to him for long life and prosperity of the child”.

Medicinal use

An old man of the village narrates that, “Meitei thum bears medicinal value as it is obtained after burning completely on the fire and the question of the presence *Timu-laimu* (pathogens and evil agents) does not arise. It is helpful in curing gastric troubles, indigestion and loss of appetite etc. By packing the *Yengshin akuppi* (a kind of herb) in plantain leaves, it has to be buried inside the burning ashes for few minutes. After some time, by smashing these *Yenshin*, juice has to be collected in a bowl. Then, taking a small piece of salt about a finger tip, it has to be burnt into the fire till it is red-heated. When dropping this red-heated salt inside the bowl there will be a smoke coming out of it leaving behind a very useful drink which can cure all the above troubles. It was also added that one should regularly use the best quality of *thumpak* for cleaning teeth which is a good practice for oral hygiene. It will strengthen the teeth and help to refrain from the problem of bad smells coming from the mouth.

Government initiatives

Government and private organizations are drawing their attention towards the exploration of the site in the last two or three years. Realizing the need towards the preservation of this age-old tradition, steps were taken up by the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal an autonomous organization under the Department of Culture, Govt. of India. It was in the year 2004, that this organization with a generous support from the Department of Art & Culture, Govt. of Manipur have initiated to develop a paraphernalia of the salt making site in its open air exhibition premises. Raw materials like thatching grasses, wood and bamboo poles etc. including a replicated life size large wooden reservoir was transported from Manipur to Bhopal. Skillful persons from the Ningel village were invited to develop an

exhibition. In the succeeding year, the museum undertook a field documentation programme, emphasizing upon the need for audio-visual recordings on the methods and techniques of salt making in Manipur. Towards the end of February, 2006, this museum has hosted a two day Workshop cum Demonstration programme on 'traditional salt making technique of Manipur' in its exhibition campus. Six expert salt-makers from Ningel village were invited to the museum for the demonstrative workshop. Natural salt water of about 25 litre was also brought from the village. Although the demonstration workshop have attained good response but, there were certain problems, that had been noticed to the salt makers. The complete change in the context of executing the work of salt making from their own environment led them to put more effort in producing the salt in a desirable shape and quantity. The new buds of plantain leaves brought for the demonstration works were getting spoiled due to the climatic changes and there were no other option to replace it by any other kind of leaves collected locally, because the use of leaves as base of salt cake was necessary to them and believed to have associated with their concept of sanctity and purity. Any unwanted activities that could affect their belief system were totally avoided.

CONCLUSION

Before the advent of branded and imported salt in this area, this valuable item of food ingredient was either obtained from the far places through exchange of goods from the traders or imported by the then rulers. Finding of salt deposit in these hilly terrains was indeed a treasure of any kingdom in this region to show his assets and bountiful resources. This may perhaps be one of the reasons that salt sites in Manipur were given royal patronage. Traditional salt in Manipur is treated to be the item of socio-economic and religious importance and every *Thumkhong* (site of salt deposition) is believed to have guarded by the *Thum Lairembi* (Goddess of salt). In any religious ceremony, festivals and many other important occasions of Meitei social life, traditional salt is indispensably used as an important item of offering. Women who deliver a new baby and undergoing pollution period are fed with this salt. It is also used in the rituals associated with naming ceremony, marriage, death. In a community festivals like *Cheiraoba* (New Year), *Lamtai Thaangja* (an annual event observed to drive out the evil spirits on community level), *Lai Haraoba* (annual merry making ceremony of the ancestral and guardian deities) traditional salts are used. Traditional salt is important in every sphere of Meitei socio-religious and economic life. The meaning of the terms like 'economy' and 'valuables' sounds incomplete without the suffix and prefix of the word *Thum or Chi*.

Traditional salt is not only a commodity of human needs among the Meiteis of Manipur but also an important cultural element that bridges the age old social and cultural relation with the neighbouring tribal people. An annual *Lai Haraoba* of the Ningel festival is incomplete without giving their salts to the neighbouring Tangkhul tribes and without offering the flowers offered by this tribal population. The myths and legends prevalent among the villagers together with their religious practices become very much pertinent into the understanding of social relations. In this present era of conflicting claims, emerged out of ethnocentrism in the name of ethnic and social identity, it is important that the underlying ideas of intangible culture in binding the human relations need to be explored. It is from the above findings it may be said that, the traditional salt in Manipur is a symbol of prosperity, peaceful culture and social solidarity and integrity.

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Notes:

1. *Meeyang Kalichas/Pangal Maar* are a sect of western immigrants, came into first contact by the Khuman King Adon Tingkhohlanba in the year 930 A.D. who raided their villages and brought some of them as war captives and made their settlement to the Meeyang Yumpham (Presently known as Mayang Imphal) (B.K. Sharma.1991:62).
2. Lairam Khullen is a Tangkhul village situated at the eastern Laimaton hill ranges in the adjoining Ukhrul and Thoubal districts of Manipur. The village is homogenously pocketed by the Tangkhul tribe.
3. Pena is one of the most ancient and popular stringed instrument used by the Meiteis in Manipur. Pena is mainly used as accompaniments in *Lai Haraoba* (Merry making festival of the ancestral deities), Pena folk songs and many other folk festival of Manipur. An expert, who sings plays the instrument, is called *Pena Shakpa*
4. Thumpot Ama is a unit consisting of 20 plates of salt.
5. Thum Namma is also a unit consisting of 10 plates of salt.

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Longitudinal form of an earthen hearth used for manufacturing salt.



Wooden reservoir for storing salt water at Ningel village



Ladies in the salt making process

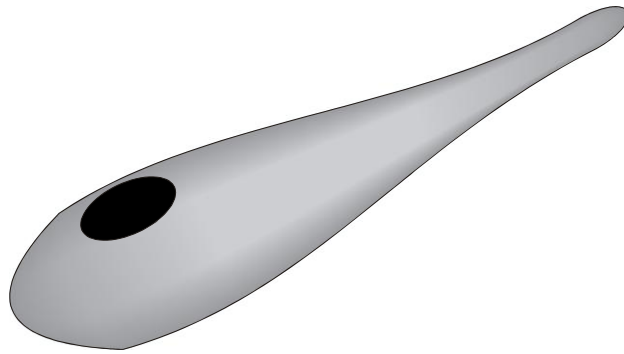


A view of salt site at Ningel village

SOME OF THE SALT MAKING TOOLS



Chillel- brass made ladle with wooden handle used for giving shape of the salt



Koret- dry gourd spoon used for pouring salt water



Tei- iron tray used for making salt disc